

THE PERSECUTION ON THE CONGO RIVER.

In the "Kassai Herald" for January, 1908, which was published by our missionaries on the Congo, there appeared an article at which the Belgian trading company has taken offense. It is this:

FROM THE BAKUBA COUNTRY.

By W. H. Sheppard.

These great stalwart men and women, who have from time immemorial been free, cultivating large farms of Indian corn, peas, tobacco, potatoes, trapping elephants for their ivory and leopards for their skins, who have always had their own king and a government not to be despised, officers of the law, established in every town of the kingdom, these magnificent people, perhaps about 400,000 in number, have entered a new chapter in the history of their tribe. Only a few years ago, travellers through this country found them living in large homes, having from one to four rooms in each house, loving and living happily with their wives and children, one of the most prosperous and intelligent of all the African tribes, though living in one of the most remote spots on the planet. One seeing the happy, busy, prosperous lives which they lived could not help feeling that surely the lines had fallen unto this people in pleasant places.

But within these last three years how changed they are! Their farms are growing up in weeds and jungle, their king is practically a slave, their houses now are mostly only half-built single rooms, and are much neglected. The streets of their towns are not clean and well swept as they once were. Even their children cry for bread.

"Why this change? You have it in a few words. There are armed sentries of chartered trading companies who force the men and women to spend most of their days and nights in the forests making rubber, and the price they receive is so meagre that they can not live upon it. In the majority of the villages these people have not time to listen to the Gospel story, or give an answer concerning their soul's salvation. Looking upon the changed scene now, one can only join with them in their groans as they must say: 'Our burdens are greater than we can bear.'"

In this article we in America can see nothing on which to base a law suit. No person is specified by name, or otherwise identified. And the descriptions of the wrongs that are being committed is exceedingly general in their presentation.

But in Central Africa another notion prevails. The trading companies have filed suit and claim damages, because of "certain statements, utterly false, which have brought great damage to the company." The suit is against Messrs. Morrison and Sheppard, two of our missionaries, and is based chiefly upon the fact that in the article which we have quoted, they are styled as "chartered" companies. They claim to be "concessionary" companies rather than "chartered."

The suit is for defamation. The damages at stake amount to \$16,000—with an alternative of five years' imprisonment.

The methods and conditions of the suit are such as to give the greatest possible annoyance. There are sittings of the Congo courts at Luebo and at Lusambo, either of which points it near the scene of the wrongs, and accessible to the natives who may be wanted to testify for the defence. But the locality of the trial is set for Leopoldville, nearly a thousand miles distant. It is no little inconvenience to our missionaries to go so far to make response; and to take the natives, who may be wanted as witnesses, is almost impossible.

The time for which the trial is set is most inconvenient. The Kassai river and the upper waters of the Congo are not navigable, for boats of good size, during the summer months. Our mission boat can hardly

reach Luebo during May, and every one concerned will have to walk two hundred miles before taking boat. And it will probably be October before the water in the river is high enough to enable the boat to return to Luebo.

The methods pursued in this court in the recent trial of Rev. Mr. Stannard, of the English Baptist Church, were such as to arouse concern. At a "Commission of Inquiry" ordered by King Leopold, two years ago, Mr. Stannard was present, and recorded the testimony of Lontulu, chief of the village of Belima, in which he related the cruelties perpetrated at that village by a Belgian officer named Haegstron. Mr. Stannard communicated these facts to Mr. E. D. Morel, secretary of the Congo Reform Association at Liverpool. After the departure of the king's commission, Lontulu was imprisoned. Mr. Stannard wrote to the association: "Chief Lontulu had specially testified about the murderous attack on his village by the soldiers of M. Haegstron." Then a charge of criminal libel was made against Mr. Stannard. The trial was deferred for eighteen months, and Lontulu was kept in prison all these months. Then Lontulu testified that he had not made this statement to the Commission, and was immediately released. Mr. Stannard asked for the Minutes of the Commission to prove the truth of his statement. The court denied his request, and fined him two hundred dollars for the libel. When he laid his case before the English government the verdict was reversed.

Since that time a new law has been promulgated making the penalty for criminal libel five years' imprisonment and a fine of one thousand francs.

The complaint against Messrs. Morrison and Sheppard is lodged by the trading company on the Congo. King Leopold owns one-half of the stock in this company. And King Leopold appoints the judge who is to try this case.

In view of all these facts Rev. Dr. Chester, our secretary of Foreign Missions, has written to the Secretary of State at Washington, asking him to give instructions to the United States consul on the Congo river to intervene so far as may be necessary to protect our missionaries from the injustice that appears probable.

The readers of this article can appeal to the Redeemer. And he is able to make his answer effective on the other side of the world without delay—instantly.

Later, Dr. Chester writes as follows:

"An interview was had with the Department of State on May 3, as the result of which instructions were sent to the American Legation at Brussels to request of the Belgian government on behalf of the United States government a postponement of the trial to a later date and the holding of it at some place sufficiently near to where the missionaries and their witnesses reside to enable them to bring their witnesses before the court without unreasonable inconvenience and expense.

"It is hoped that the mere fact of our government letting the Belgian government know that it is concerning itself for the protection of our American citizens in the Congo State will be sufficient to prevent the perpetration of the judicial outrage which the circumstances mentioned above clearly indicated it to be the purpose of the authorities in the Congo State to perpetuate."